# Social Science Seeks Enlightenment

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Our social sciences are seeking a new orientation. For roughly three hundred years the scholars in these fields of knowledge have been pursuing the truth in the intellectual squirrel cage of scientific thought. It was Thomas Hobbes, that wisp of a British mathematician, that started social scientists on the road to intellectual and moral frustration. By his emphasis upon the primacy of the hedonistic individual and the method of rational science he turned the intellectual world upside down. From that time forth men were to abandon the canons of thought which rested upon faith in a sovereign God and to substitute in their place a faith in a sovereign universe.

The effects of this naturalistic orientation were not immediately evident. Few men saw the results of transferring the foundations of their thought from the *premises* of Augustine to those of Descartes and Hobbes. Writers such as Locke lived in the pattern of the strictest Puritan but thought in the language of the urbane pagan. What would happen when the "salt" of the Christian assumptions had lost its "savor" and only the sanctions of the rationalized concept of past experience remained? Only the excesses of the late eighteenth century revolutions and the disasters of the early twentieth century holocausts could tell.

It may appear to some that this is a far-fetched observation. Few students of the social sciences realize that the basic assumptions of any science of society are consonant with the total culture of which they are a part.[1] A hasty review of the history of social thought reveals the fact that the social science of the classical world was cast in the mold of the reflective sciences of that cultural period. Herodotus cannot be adequately understood apart from the work of Thales and Heraclitus, nor can Thucydides be properly appreciated unless studied in the light of Hippocrates and Galen. Aristotle, also, drew inspiration from these sources. The Christian publicists leaned heavily upon Plato's Timaeus as well as the cosmology of the Hebrew Scriptures for their social epistemology.[2]

The mediaeval world witnessed a growing fission between a culture viewed within the Christian framework of ideas and that prehended through the scientific framework brought to life in the renaissance of classical culture. Aquinas endeavored to weld these conflicting orientations into a universal synthesis which offered to create a new framework for the social thought of the West. Marsiglio of Padua gave warning in the fourteenth century that the union could not be permanent. Luther and Calvin strove to lead the Western world back to thoroughly Christian presuppositions. But by the seventeenth century Hobbes had frankly renounced all revelational elements in his framework of thought and had launched boldly upon an attempt to place social science within the framework of the natural sciences of the Greeks. In so doing he chose to divorce social thought in the West from the great presuppositions which had been the foundation for all social thinkers for over a millenium.

Nature now became the deity of the Western world. All of the creative attributes of the God of the Hebrew-Christian system were transferred to that hypostasis of the natural universe known as Nature.

[1] R. S. Lynd, *Knowledge for What? The Place of Social Science in American Culture* (Princeton University Press, Princeton, New Jersey, 1939), 116

[2] C. N. Cochrane, *Christianity and Classical Culture* (Oxford University Press, New York, 1944), 458-459, 469-471.

The universe was presumed to be mechanistic in operation, mathematical in composition, and geometric in design. God could be understood perfectly by understanding Nature. Man could be identified only as a part of Nature. Society was the creation of man in harmony with the laws of Nature. Hence, if one would know society and the social life of man he must erect a "social physics," that is, a science of society based upon a study of the "natural laws" of society.

The fruit of this endeavor is to be found in the work of Comte, Marx and Spencer in the nineteenth century. Two of these men, Comte and Marx, deserve special mention. The first is to be noted for his popularization of positivism as the method of science. In this system scientific study was held to deal only with the attributes of things revealed to the senses through observation and classification. The generalizations thus developed were held to be scientific laws upon which a science of society could be erected. When once constructed this body of science would grant prevision to men and thus enable human leaders to plan public policy with a greater degree of accuracy. and efficiency. Comte was seeking for a basis of ideological unity in the Western world. He thought that he had found it in the directly observable phenomena of social life. These data, inductively perceived and classified, would be recognizable by all because a part of their experience. Positive truth would then be the ideological framework of Western culture.

Comte's importance as a scientific philosopher has long since been diminished by the more mature observations of other scholars. The fact that Comte discouraged the use of microscopes and instruments of precise measurement in scientific investigation, because they brought to light data not immediately discernable to the layman and thereby upset his plan to use only that data within the observation of all, has thrown suspicion upon his character as a scientist. When it is also known that Comte repudiated many of his ideas concerning the validity of human reason and scientific truth as set forth in *Cours de Philosophie Positive* (Paris, 1830-1842), and that he boldly returned to the metaphysical basis of thinking in his *System of Positive Polity* (1851-1854)) it is to be recognized that Comte had serious misgivings about the validity of his whole system.[3] Yet his early advocacy of a science of society, which he first called social physics and later (1838) sociology, remains as part of our culture as well as his insistence upon the inductive methods of observation then employed in the physical sciences as the only legitimate approach to the study of social phenomena. In fact, it can safely be affirmed that Comte's vision of a social science that would bring predictive control within the hand of man is still the motivating spirit of social scientists today. Gunnar Myrdal, the noted Swedish social scientist, has recently declared:

> The rationalism and moralism which is the driving force behind social study .... is the faith that institutions can be improved and strengthened and that people are good enough to live a happier life ... To find the practical formulas for this never-ending reconstruction of society is the supreme task of social science. .... We have today in social science a greater trust in the improvability of man and society that we have ever had since the Enlightenment.[4]

The work of Karl Marx is still more interesting as an example of the interaction between the science of the nineteenth century and social theory. Marx is usally associated with Hegel because of his use of the dialectical mode in his treatment of materialistic influences in the universe. Hegel, it will be remembered, employed a form of dialectical idealism; Marx shifted the emphasis to a dialectical materialism. What is not often recognized in Marx' insistence upon the primacy of materialistic forces is his debt to classical and modern science. Marx was a very careful student of ancient philosophy. His

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[3] *System of Positive Polity* (London, 1875-1877), I, 341.

[4] Gunnar Myrdal, *The American Dilemma* (Harper and Brothers, New York, 1944), II, 1024.

doctoral dissertation at the University of Jena was entitled, "The Difference between the Democritean and Epicurean Natural Philosophy."[5] His familiarity with the Greek philosophers enabled him to discover the original sources of Hegel's dialectic in the dialectical materialism of Heraclitus, He, therefore, repudiated the idealistic application of Hegel for the materialistic thesis of the original and in so doing made Hegel appear as if standing on his head.[6]

The presuppositions of Heraclitus had been highly refined by the nineteenth century scientists. Early in the century Sadi Carnot, (1796-1832) the brilliant French physicist, had developed the principle known as the second law of thermodynamics. A few years later Rudolf Clausius (1822-1888) amplified this general principle into a scientific theory by an elaborate series of tests and observations. His idea that the molecules in electrolytes are continually interchanging atoms became popularized as the Clausian theory of entropy. By the terms of this system the whole universe was conceived as in the process of continuous change. The static view of the world as sustained by natural law was thrown into the discard as no longer tenable. With it went the whole body of social theory which had been based upon those presuppositions. A search for dynamic or changing concepts followed. Darwin seized upon the concept of eternal struggle as the motivating factor for change in the natural universe. His *Origin of Species* which appeared in 1859 served as an inspiration to Marx and aided him in formulating a social theory built more directly upon the Clausian base.[7]

These influences are directly observable in Marx' insistence upon the principle of continuous change in human society and his refusal to deal with men as individuals.[8] Men were to be studied collectively. To do otherwise was to view them as something other than men. It was the collective experience of men that formed the basis for empirical study. Men thought and acted in association with each other within the framework of a material universe analagous to that within which the atom or molecule existed. Men were subject to the same material forces, impersonal in nature and therefore subject to empirical observation and classification. The "dialectic" of human life in society was not looked upon as cause in the ontological sense. It was, says Vernon, "the formal structure of material processes whose particular content, direction and tempo can be determined only by empirical examination."[9]

Engels expressed the Marxian view very clearly when he wrote in his *Ludwig Feuerbach*: "...the conflict of innumerable individual wills and individual actions in the domain of history produces a state of affairs entirely analogous to that in the real of unconscious nature. The ends of the actions are intended, but the results which actually follow from these actions are not intended... Historical events thus appear on the whole to be likewise governed by chance. But where on the surface accident holds sway, there actually it is always governed by inner, hidden laws and it is only a matter of discovering these laws."[10]

The importance of the Marxian influence upon social theory cannot be minimized. Its professed adherence to the canons of physical science has won for it a place in Western culture out of all proportion to its validity as a scientific system of thought.[11] Indeed, it has passed from the realm of science to the realm of faith. Appearing now in the gospel of Communism it threatens to enthral the entire

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[5]Chester Maxey, *Political Philosophies* (Macmillan, New York, 1938), 567; Isaiah Berlin, *Karl Marx* (Oxford University Press, New York, 1948, second edition), 78.

[6]C. N. Cochrane, *Christianity and Classical Culture,* fn423.

[7]Vernon Venable, *Human Natures The Marxian View* (Alfred A. Knopf, New York, 1945), 14-15.

[8]Vernon Venable, *op. cit.,* 13-14

[9]*Ibid.,* 173.

[10]Cited in Robert P. Casey, *Religion in Russia,* (Harper and Brothers, New York, 1946) 73-74.

[11]Pitirim Sorokin, *Contemporary Sociological Theories,* (Harper and Brothers, New York, 1928) 527-546.

Eastern and Western world.[12] And all of this in spite of the fact that both history and science have raised questions as to the validity of its predictions. History has demonstrated that the class struggle does not always result in the destruction of the entrepreneur and the elevation of the proletariat. Science has concluded since the announcement of the principle of indeterminancy by Heisenberg in 1927 that prediction is indeterminate in character for the atomic universe. Planck's more and recent discovery that natural forces are not continuous tends to throw doubt upon the whole concept of a teleological dialectic. In a word, scientific theory has deserted the Marxian hypothesis, leaving his social theory bereft of its entire system of constructs.

The fate of Marxian social theory is the fate of all social theory which is tied to the epistemology of the physical sciences. The whole concept of uniformity in the natural world, which formed the basic presupposition for order and law in the social world, is now swept away. The idea of law derived through empirical observation is now admitted to be at best a statistical average.[13] Scientific prediction has moved from the realm of the absolute to that of the relative or probable. In effect, all that we may assert to be scientific truth in the social realm is verified historical experience. We can never claim universally predictable validity for our hypotheses in the realm of social science any more than we can claim such for the field of the physical sciences.

A number of social scientists are today calling for a reorientation of this field of inquiry. Gunnar Myrdal in his recent study of the Negro in America challenges student of society to clarify their position as scientific investigators and interpreters. He lays particular stress upon the importance of recognizing certain *a priori* assumptions in one's work (a position that has been bitterly contested by all of the followers of Comte and Dewey), and the necessity of clarifying and defining the terms and concepts used in research. He makes bold to assert that social scientists are dealing with thinking human beings and that the prevailing climate of opinion is an important scientific datum in analyzing human behavior.[14] Robert M. MacIver of Columbia University has coined the phrase "dynamic assessment" to focus attention upon the fact that men make decisions leading to action within a framework of environmental influences which included not only the social and technological order but the cultural order which embraces the realm of ideas in traditions, faith and philosophies.[15] Others such as Robert S. Lynd of *Middletown* fame are in revolt against the enslavement of the social sciences to the empirical method of the physical sciences. He believes that the method leads to the arbitrary exclusion of pertinent data from the field of observation.[16]

A few of our modern social scientists have made bold to adopt a new viewpoint for the study of man. Pitrim Sorokin of Harvard University has frankly rejected the limited universal of the natural science approach. He has endeavored to recognize within the existing culture various orders of truth including that of religious faith. By so doing he has again admitted to the scope of scientific consciousness the reality of spiritual power which transcends that of either the mind or the senses. He endeavors to interpret culture in reference to norms that are "given" and not empirically derived from a set of circumstances. For Sorokin the motion of men in society is not that of mechanical regularity, but one of fluctuation. There is no movement of linear or cyclical progress as long advocated by adherents to the various

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[12] Cesar Barja, "The Outlook for European Culture:I," in *The Outlook for Postwar Europe* (University of California Press, Berkeley, California, 1945), 84-85.

[13] A. S. Eddington, *The Nature of the Physical World,* (Macmillan, New York, 1928) 98.

[14] *An American Dilemma,* II, Appendix 2, pp. 1032-1057.

[15] *Social Causation,* (Ginn and Company, New York, 1942), 271-274.

[16] *Knowledge for What?* 123-125.

scientific traditions.[17]

Arnold Toynbee, the English historian, has employed a similar orientation in his prodigious study of twenty-six civilizations. For Toynbee the pattern of motion in societies is one of challenge and response both to the physical and social environment and to the problems involved in successfully conducting the civilization produced.[18] He denies the organic character of civilizations, which is an attempt to identify the life of men with that of biological organisms, and substitutes therefor a set of relations existing between living men in a given society at a particular moment in history. By accepting the world view of Augustine and the early Christian publicists he projects his findings against a background which views God as an active agent in the universe.[19]

This break with naturalistic presuppositions in the social sciences is one of the most challenging developments in our day.[20] It opens the way for a reconsideration of the problems of our time in the light of the Christian revelation. Within the scope of these newer approaches to the problems of man the Christian doctrines of sin and redemption have real meaning. They open the door in a new way to the application of the Gospel to the amelioration of human problems in our time.

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[17]Hans Speier, "The Sociological Ideas of Pitirim Alexandrovitch Sorokin. 'Integralist' Sociology" in H. E. Barnes, *et al, An Introduction to the History of Sociology,* 884-900.

[18]Arnold J. Toynbee, *Civilization on Trial* (Oxford University Press, New York, 1948), 3-15.

[19]H. E. Barnes, *op cit.,* 717-736; *Time,* March 17, 1947, 71-79.

[20]See Kenneth Scott Latourette, "The Christian Understanding of History," *American Historical Review,* LIV: 259-276, for a recent presentation of the Christian view of history as the working framework ot one of America's most distinguished historians.